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THE NEW TESTAMENT IDEA OF THE FUTURE LIFE

III. THE FUTURE LIFE IN THE TEACHING OF PAUL

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In our Lord's own teaching there is little immediate reference to the life after death. The mind of Jesus was occupied with the hope of the approaching Kingdom; and in this comprehensive hope all his anticipations of the future were to some extent merged. For the beginnings of a specific doctrine of immortality we must turn to the writings of the apostle Paul. Even here, it is true, the doctrine is not presented clearly and systematically. We have to deal, rather, with a variety of suggestions, thrown out from time to time in the course of the apostle's teaching, and often not a little difficult to reconcile with one another. It was reserved for subsequent thinkers to gather up these fruitful suggestions and to develop them more fully. But in this doctrine, as in every other, the Pauline ideas were determinative for the later theology. The Christian conception of the future life was molded, in all its essential features, by the hand of Paul.

There were several reasons why the belief in immortality, which had hitherto been involved in the wider hope for the Kingdom, offered itself to Paul as a separate object of theological reflection. In the first place, the faith of the church was now directed not so much to the message of Jesus as to his person, and especially to the supreme facts of his death and resurrection. At the outset, the resurrection had been viewed, almost solely, as the divine attestation of Jesus' claim to messiahship; but it was felt increasingly that this did not exhaust its significance. In the light of their knowledge that the Lord had risen again the disciples were led to reflect more deeply on the mysteries of life and death. The conviction grew in their minds that the rising of Christ from the grave had a representative value. He had passed into that higher state of existence for which all God's people were destined, and had

overcome death on their behalf. Again, the enthusiastic hope which had inspired the church in its earliest days was gradually changing its character. The original disciples had looked for a kingdom which was to break in almost immediately, and into which they would enter without the necessity of death. In this religious attitude there was little place for anything like a reasoned faith in immortality. But years had now passed and the Lord's coming was delayed. Numbers of devout men who had confidently awaited it had already suffered the common lot of death. The mood of disappointment and perplexity into which the church had thus fallen is vividly reflected to us in Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. It had become necessary to make it clear that the Christian hope was independent of the mere accident of physical survival until the Parousia. The dead would be raised again to meet the Lord, and those who were alive would have no advantage over those who slept. Once more, the mission to the gentiles had tended of itself to bring the idea of immortality into stronger relief. To the gentile public the traditions of Jewish apocalypse were for the most part foreign; and the missionaries were compelled to translate their message into terms that would be more generally intelligible. The conception of immortality had been familiar to the Greek mind from the time of Plato downward; and it had now become widely current through the influence of those new cults which had invaded Europe from the East. Insensibly the Christian hope detached itself from its original framework, and was presented to the gentile world as the hope of an immortal life. Apart, moreover, from these wider reasons, inherent in the conditions of the time, we must take into account the personal antecedents of Paul himself. It must always be remembered that he was trained in the Pharisaic school, with which the doctrine of the resurrection was peculiarly associated. As a Christian thinker he naturally turned with a special predilection to this particular belief, so closely identified from the first with his religious interests. He was not merely assuming a part, in order to separate his enemies, when he exclaimed before the council, "I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question" (Acts 23:6).

In the teaching of Paul, therefore, the idea of the future life obtains a new prominence, although it still stands in a subordinate relation to his theology as a whole. Paul is concerned primarily with the redemption achieved by Christ—a redemption of which the life hereafter is rather the necessary consequence than the direct purpose. His treatment of this doctrine is thus incidental in its character, and is governed throughout by his exposition of the main principles of the Christian message. In one great passage, indeed (I Cor., chap. 15), he appears to sum up into a single consecutive argument his teaching on the subject of immortality; but this passage, when we consider it more closely, is only a fragment. It deals not so much with the larger problem as with one definite question on which Paul and many of his converts were at issue: "How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?" (I Cor. 15:35.) To his conclusions as to the nature of the resurrection, so elaborately set forth by Paul, we shall turn our attention later. We have first to determine, with the help of such scattered indications as are offered to us in the epistles, how he conceived of the broad fact of the future life.

He takes his departure from those eschatological ideas which were part of the inheritance of the primitive church from Judaism. It was believed that the present age was shortly to give place to the new age of the Kingdom of God. This new age would be inaugurated by the glorious coming of the Messiah, who would form his people into a heavenly community. Those who were yet alive at his advent would undergo a mysterious change: those who had died would be restored to life when the Lord descended from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God (I Thess. 4:16). In the first instance, therefore, Paul simply accepts the belief in the future life as he had received it from the current tradition, and expresses it in terms of the traditional imagery. He sees in Jesus the Messiah whose work is "to deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal. 1:4). He thinks of eternal life as a special gift bestowed by God on those who have inherited his Kingdom (Rom. 6:23).

But these apocalyptic ideas which Paul took over from the primitive church are profoundly modified by certain new elements

which he combines with them. The redemption, as he conceives it, is something more than the right of participation in the future messianic age. It becomes to his mind a present deliverance from sin and the flesh and the law and all powers which have hitherto held men in bondage. There can be little doubt that we have here to allow for an influence on the apostle's thinking of ideas derived from Greek speculation and oriental mysticism. According to these ideas the material world was inherently evil, and the true goal of human aspiration was to escape from it into the eternal supersensuous world. In the theology of Paul we begin to encounter the characteristic words and turns of thought of this Graeco-oriental mysticism. Sin has its stronghold in the fleshly constitution of man's nature. Over against the seen and temporal things there stand the things which are unseen and eternal. What is corruptible and mortal must put on incorruption and immortality (*ἀφθαρσία, ἀθανασία*). The Apostle still adheres to the primitive Christian hope of an approaching kingdom, in which an eternal life will fall to the portion of the righteous. But this thought of the coming redemption is blended with that of an inward and present redemption. The Christian has been delivered even now from the powers of darkness and translated into the Kingdom of God's dear Son (Col. 1:13). He has been set free from the world of flesh and corruption and made to participate in the true life.

In this manner Paul breaks away from the native Jewish conception of a future life which will be only the restoration, under larger and happier conditions, of the life on earth. He feels that our natural being is leavened through and through with the element of mortality. It is fleshly, corruptible, part and parcel with "this body of death." The true deliverance must consist, not in a mere revival of the natural being, but in a complete release from that principle of death which resides in it. We must be raised out of the old life of corruption and enter upon a life which is different in kind and which belongs to the higher, imperishable world. It is not necessary that we should die before this change can be wrought in us. The redemption we seek is from the indwelling power of death; and while we yet continue in the flesh we can

undergo that redemption. In the future age our new state of being will be made fully manifest. "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, we also shall appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:4). But the new life is inwardly present already in those who have been redeemed. "Ye are dead"—exempt even now from the bondage of this world—"and your life is hid with Christ in God."

The new life, as thus conceived, connects itself for Paul with the work achieved by Christ. He is the Redeemer, who has made possible for men their escape into a higher world out of their natural state of corruption and death. The redemptive work of Christ was accomplished on the cross, whereby he destroyed once for all the power of the sinful flesh and set men free from the law of ordinances that was against them. But the work of the cross was completed and set forth in its true meaning by the resurrection; and it is to the resurrection that Paul's doctrine of the future life is more immediately related. He dwells on this great fact of the Christian message, and seeks in several different directions to trace out its full significance.

1. In the resurrection of Christ he finds the palpable evidence that there is a life beyond the grave. The hope of immortality is no longer to be regarded as a matter of dream and speculation, for it has been guaranteed by an authentic fact. Before he proceeds to his theological argument in I Cor., chap. 15, Paul is careful to set on record the historical testimonies for the Lord's appearance after death. He bids his readers ground their faith in the simple fact, which in itself is all-sufficient. "Christ has risen from the dead, the first-fruits of them that slept." In the knowledge that he arose we have the promise and assurance of a life in store for his people.

2. But the resurrection is something more than the irresistible evidence of a future life. As the other side of the work achieved on the cross, it was itself the redeeming act whereby a new life was rendered possible. We have here to remember the peculiar categories, borrowed from the thought of his time, by means of which Paul sought to interpret the Christian message. He conceived of death as a single pervading principle which would suffer a universal collapse if it were stricken decisively at some one point. Christ

did battle with death as it manifested itself in his own person. The victory which was signalized by his resurrection meant nothing less than that the power of death was definitely broken. "Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9). And this victory of the redeemer availed for all men everywhere. "If one died for all, then are all dead" (II Cor. 5:14). As an outward and physical fact death continues to overshadow the world; but its real power has departed from it. It was dispossessed forever in the one great combat, and men are free to shake off its tyranny and to lay hold on life.

3. But Paul attributes a yet further meaning to the resurrection. Although it was a personal act, achieved once for all by Christ, the believer can so identify himself with it that it will be repeated in his own experience. A way is open whereby he may attain to that higher state of being into which Christ has passed. "He that raised up Jesus from the dead shall raise up us also by Jesus" (II Cor. 4:14). "If we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5). "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I may attain to the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. 3:11). To the strain of thought which meets us in these and similar sayings we find striking analogies in the oriental religions. The mystic rites of Attis and Mithra and Osiris all had for their object a symbolical identification with the dying and rising god, whose victory over the evil powers was thus shared by his worshipers. It is more than probable that Paul was affected, consciously or not, by these modes of thinking which had become so widely diffused in his time. With the help of suggestions borrowed from the mysteries he sought to transform the resurrection from an outward historical fact into a living experience of Christian faith.

The resurrection is thus of primary importance for Paul's doctrine of the future life; but even while he emphasizes its significance he tries to get behind it. As he contemplates the one historical act it becomes for him the type of some experience, or the crisis of some divine process. We have now to examine the most characteristic of these conceptions whereby Paul tries to

interpret to himself the meaning and efficacy of the achievement of Christ. He sees in it the working of the Spirit, which by means of it becomes operative in all believers. "If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwelleth in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you" (Rom. 8:11). In other words, it was the life of the Spirit that was imparted by Christ as the abiding possession of his people.

The conception of the Spirit, so fundamental in all the apostle's thinking, is a many-sided one, and we cannot here attempt to analyze it, or to trace out the different influences, Hebrew, Greek, oriental, which went to its formation. Broadly speaking, the Spirit may be defined as the divine power which belongs to the higher world and manifests itself in the new age. As such it is contrasted with the flesh, the ruling principle of the present order, which lies under the dominion of sin and death. The flesh makes for corruption; the Spirit is life-giving, and can itself be described as life. In Christ the Spirit was present, as the power that constituted his nature and expressed itself through all his work. And in the church, which is the body of Christ, this power that dwelt in him continues to reveal its presence. It is the source of the marvelous gifts exercised by believers, of the new intimations of God's will and purposes, of the higher moral activities. Above all, by their possession of the spirit given by Christ, his people have obtained life. The life will be fully realized hereafter, when it is allied with another and more adequate body; but already it is inwardly present. In the Spirit which is now theirs the believers have an "earnest" of that new life which flows from the Spirit. "If Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:10). The work of Christ has resulted in this, that the old principle of the flesh, with its conditions of sin and mortality, has been done away, and its place has been taken by a new and higher principle. "The first man Adam was made a living soul, the last Adam was made a quickening Spirit" (I Cor. 15:45). Or, as Paul expresses it elsewhere, man's nature is brought under a different law by Christ, and is thus transformed and liberated. "The law of the Spirit of life in

Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2).

In his doctrine of the Spirit, therefore, Paul offers an interpretation of the redeeming work of Christ. By means of it, also, he seeks to provide a speculative basis for the hope of immortality. He set out, we must remember, from the traditional Jewish conception, according to which man was only "a living soul"—a creature of flesh and blood whose natural lot was to perish. The Greek thinkers had argued for an immortality which was inherent in man as an intellectual being; but this view was altogether alien to Paul. He was thus confronted with the problem of how man, an earthly creature, could yet participate in the world of incorruption, and he was able to solve it in only one way. Man's nature is in itself corruptible, but it undergoes a change through the entrance into it of a higher element. The Spirit with which we are endued by Christ takes the place of the "living soul." The principle of our being is henceforth spiritual, and we are rendered capable of laying hold on the new life which is offered us. Even while we yet remain in the body we are conscious in ourselves of the promise of immortality. Our own life has become interfused with that of the Spirit, which belongs to the eternal world.

At this point, however, we have to consider the further development of Paul's doctrine, to which it owes its permanent significance. He thinks of the Spirit not only as a metaphysical principle, but as the new moral power, operative in the Christian life. It manifests itself by a work of regeneration effected in the mind and character. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith" (Gal. 5:22). Perhaps it was Paul's chief service to Christian thought that he thus connected the working of the Spirit with the life of moral obedience. He saw the supernatural element of Christianity, not in miracles and gifts of tongues, but in the power which cleansed men's hearts and renewed their wills. This power could only proceed from the Spirit of God. Paul can speak, therefore, in interchangeable terms of the life imparted by the Spirit and the moral activities which flow from Christian discipleship. When he distinguishes between the outward man that perishes and the inward man that is renewed day

by day, the contrast in his mind is that of the merely physical, and the moral and religious life. To fulfil the law of Christ is to sow to the Spirit and reap from it life everlasting. Thus in the last resort Paul's conception of the new life which cannot be destroyed by death is the same as that of Jesus. To Jesus the moral ideals are the sole realities, and to live for them is to rise out of this perishing world and to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Paul also discovers the true and enduring life in love, goodness, faith. Having within us this mind of Christ we possess the Spirit, which is the earnest of immortality.

But while the apostle's thought may thus be expressed in ethical terms, we need to recognize the peculiar implications of his doctrine of the Spirit. The Christian life, as he regarded it, was in a literal and almost material sense a new creation. Those moral activities of which it was capable had their ground in a divine energy that had entered into the believer and replaced the old principle of his being. Not a little of the difficulty of Paul's teaching is due to this curious blending, entirely foreign to our modern modes of thought, of ethical and semiphysical ideas. The Spirit is at once a regenerating moral power and a sort of ethereal substance which takes possession of the fleshly nature. It is necessary to bear this in mind before we proceed to examine that special aspect of Paul's conception of immortality which is set forth in the great passage of I Cor. He there anticipates a future when the spiritual life, already manifesting itself in Christian discipleship, will be clothed with a "spiritual body."